

Sermon for Proper 18C
Sunday, September 4, 2022
“Transformation in the here and now”

Texts: Philemon; Luke 14:25-33

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today we are blessed with a rare opportunity. Except for the final four verses, we have experienced the rare opportunity of hearing an epistle of St. Paul in one reading. It was the custom of the church in the 1st Century to read Paul’s letters publicly in worship. That’s how the Epistles to the Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians would have been presented—in their entirety to the gathered community. Although the Letter to Philemon was written by one friend to another and probably would not have been read publicly, reading it in its entirety today is as close as we can come to a common practice among the first Christians that can be done within a practical time frame during our limited mass time.

The Letter to Philemon provides a quick example of a typical Pauline letter written more or less in proper Hellenistic epistolary style—in other words, it has features characteristic of a well-written letter for his day. It begins by identifying the author, along with anyone else who might have been involved in the letter’s composition, like a scribe or co-author; in this case, Timothy, who accompanied Paul in his travels. Then it names the recipient of the letter, along with any other important and cherished individuals who might also read or hear the letter. And, you will notice, that those acknowledgements were modified with flattery and niceties. Then, there are some words of gratitude and appreciation that acknowledge the importance of the recipients to Paul’s life and ministry. Very typical of a Pauline letter.

After the preliminary opening sentences, Paul proceeds to the reasons why he has written the letter. He wrote to Philemon because he wanted to discuss a matter concerning Onesimus, who it is presumed, was a slave of Philemon. There are two schools of thought regarding Onesimus. The most widely held presumption is that Onesimus was a runaway slave who stole some money or property belonging to Philemon, and sought refuge from Paul during his imprisonment probably in Ephesus, but possibly Rome or Caesarea Maritima on the coast of Judea. Another suggestion is that Onesimus was sent by Philemon to care for Paul during his imprisonment. Either way, Onesimus converted to Christianity and was baptized, so Paul wrote this letter to Philemon to appeal on Onesimus’s behalf that when he returns, Philemon would treat him as a brother in Christ, maybe even more than a brother. Paul may even be suggesting that Onesimus have a more prominent role in the church. Paul also hoped that Philemon would not punish Onesimus in any way and even offered to pay reparations for any wrong that Onesimus might have done or debts he might owe. At the end of his appeal, Paul walks a fine line between making a humble request and exercising his authority by saying to Philemon that he is confident of his obedience in this matter and will even go beyond what is expected. The letter ends with the usual greetings to fellow workers and concludes with a doxology.

Now a letter like this might leave you wondering about its purpose in scripture. It is written to a particular individual and doesn't contain any obvious statements of doctrine or teaching points for the church's behavior. The Letter to Philemon is often avoided in sermons because its contents seem remote to modern-day Christians, but in fact, it speaks to us even today, and shows us an example of both good discipleship by Paul and the gospel's ability to transform lives—in this instance, that of Onesimus.

Sadly, this letter and other writings by St. Paul were used in American history to justify and perpetuate the institution of slavery in America. We still wrestle with things written in Paul's letters that influence the church's teaching on the role of women in the church, sexuality, and moral behavior. Many of the interpretations of Paul's writings have been codified in the church's canons and in civil laws. Since the beginning, Scripture has been the foundation and cornerstone for God-centered living among humanity, but Holy Scripture has been used for the purposes of suppressing and controlling others. In our own time, we have witnessed verses of the Bible used over and over again by religious leaders and institutions to perpetuate discrimination, injustice directed against various categories of people, and to pass judgment on them. But humans are human, and we make mistakes, sometimes even the church and the way in which we misuse scripture to abuse others.

There is wisdom that we can learn from the letter to Philemon. This is not just a letter about returning a slave; it is a statement of a transformation—a transformation that occurred in the life of Onesimus. Paul no longer considered him a slave, but a child and a brother, and Paul urged Philemon to undergo a transformation in himself and regard Onesimus as a brother as well. Kinship in the Christian community has always been an important factor; kinship in the Christian community—certainly in the community of Paul—marks a relationship among baptized believers that is akin to adoption, with all the benefits being shared among them as peers and members of a family. No one is better than the other. Paul feels like a father in the faith to Onesimus, who has been transformed into a child of the Father in heaven, and is made fully aware of the great love that he receives from God through Christ Jesus.

The good news for us that we can glean from the Letter to Philemon is that in Christ, we reject the typical ways of the world and are transformed into something new, something different. In baptism, we are adopted into a great family of witnesses known and unknown, alive and long gone. We are adopted into a family with certain privileges, but more so, a family with certain responsibilities and expectations. We are expected to love one another, respect one another; we are expected to find the dignity of every human being—the beacon of Christ's light that burns within all of us—even when that light seems hidden or unrecognizable.

Our struggle to lead and live life according to the teachings and precepts of Jesus Christ means that we have to go against the norms and customs of society. That's what Jesus was talking about in the Gospel lesson when he said that in order to be his disciple

we must hate father and mother, wife and children, sister and brother, even one's own life cannot be a disciple of Christ, the anointed one. Jesus isn't saying that we must hate in the way that one would hate an enemy, with malice or malintent against another—by no means! Rather, Jesus means that we must love someone or something more than someone or something else; we must renounce one choice in favor of another; we must choose a life loving him and following his example more than we love members of our family, our own lives, or the power, prestige, and material things that this world lures us with. Everyone must carry his own cross. Long before Jesus's passion, he used the image of carrying a heavy burden in one's journey of following him. To be a follower of Jesus Christ, we must be willing to a life of humility, service, love, and forgiveness over our own aggrandizement, our own prestige.

We live in a society where the needs and desires of the individual seem more important than the well-being of the society as a whole, collective community. We seem to have lost the sense that we live in a very large village and we should be concerned with the well-being of those around us, not just ourselves. No matter who we are, where we come from, where we were born, our family's background, our status in the eyes of human institutions and powers, or what we've done in our lives, we are all sisters and brothers, children of God through Christ Jesus. As such, we are committed to proclaiming that to be true and bearing witness to the good news of Jesus Christ in the way we behave and treat other people. There is so much meanness among people nowadays; we see it among our politicians, we see it among nations, we see it on our streets and in our neighborhoods, we see it in our families, we see it in our churches and among Christians. We need to return to being caring for the survival and thriving of one another.

Even among those of us who try to live the Christian life, we must be careful not to try carrying our crosses for the wrong reasons. I heard an powerful sermon on today's Gospel by Pope Francis early this morning, as he gave the homily at a mass to beatify Pope John Paul I, who served as pope for only 33 days in 1978. In his homily, Pope Francis cautioned Christians against following the way of Christ in order to gain power, prestige, honor, or using one's Christian belief in an attempt to impose one's authority over another. He urged the temptation to put ourselves at the center but to keep God at the center of all that we do. That message may be difficult to comprehend when we look at how the church itself looks and operates with its hierarchical structure, precious liturgies, ornate vessels and decorations, and fancy vestments. But, all of these things are supposed to point us toward a life of humility and service, with less attention to ourselves and more attention to God. Moreover, we Christians must not use our belief in God through Jesus Christ or our understanding of the Bible as a weapon to cut down those who are different, or those with whom we disagree, or those who live their lives in a way different from the way we would choose. We each have the responsibility to take up our own crosses and to do the best that we humanly can, and pray that others will do the same.

Unfortunately, history has shown time and time again, that God's holy word has been used against the people of God to deny them their place as members of the Body of Christ. Thanks be to God that the gospel message to us calls us to a better life. St. Paul's Letter to Philemon reminds us that the walls and barriers that are put up between us are knocked down by our baptism, when we are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own sisters and brothers for ever. The message of the Letter to Philemon is a testimony of the transformation that we can undergo from being slaves to men into servants of God. Amen.

Resources

“Commentary on Philemon 1:1-21” in *The Working Preacher*,
http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2975

Feasting on the Word, for Proper 18 (Year C, Volume 4)

Lloyd A. Lewis, “An African American Appraisal of the Philemon-Paul-Onesimus Triangle” in *Stony the Road We Trod: An African American Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Cain Hope Felder,
https://books.google.com/books?id=NFYPnaPB0usC&pg=PA232&lpg=PA232&dq=%22An+African+American+appraisal+of+the+philemon-paul-onesimus+triangle%22+Lloyd+A.+Lewis&source=bl&ots=7E-gm_Yi7E&sig=W9irNG7LfKWwBuew9x9ApxksLoI&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj40tjh4vTOAhXIJiYKHcOVAYgQ6AEILzAF#v=onepage&q&f=false